Chapter 55

Measuring the Social Impact: How Social Media Affects Higher Education Institutions

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ABSTRACT

Effective social media usage has particular challenges for HE institutions. The many opportunities afforded by social media, increasingly demanded by students, have negative potential. Social technology requires substantial investment to do well, and in particular, it can be very hard to measure its performance. In this chapter, the authors focus on how aligning with strategic objectives can reduce the risk and enhance the effectiveness of social media use throughout the student lifecycle. They also consider the risks which social media investment entails in HE. Using a case study of a UK university, the authors identify common themes for social media adoption in educational settings. They offer practical recommendations and key areas to consider before launching or enhancing a social media strategy in the field of HE.

1. INTRODUCTION

The significance of social networking is no longer contested; it is viewed by many as a game-changing innovation set to transform the face of higher education. Social media is on its way to earning a distinctive position amongst educational technologies, attracting the attention of academic and industry researchers. The adoption of social media for academic purposes became inevitable with the wide acceptance of the tool by end-users. Social media in higher education took on a multi-faceted role: serving as networking enabler, marketing and recruitment tool, collaboration, teaching and learning tool as well as a medium presenting career management and entrepreneurship opportunities (Benson & Morgan, 2014). Extant literature offers rich accounts of the integration of social media in educational settings; the positive impact of this technology outweighs the negative potential. However, this area requires further exploration.

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We hope that this chapter will provide a balanced view which will be helpful for the use of social media within university strategy while raising the awareness of the challenges presented by this technology.

Earlier research (see for review Benson, Morgan & Tennakoon, 2012) opened up a discussion of how universities adopt social media, not only for marketing but for relationship building, career management and learning and teaching purposes. Conole and Alevizou (2010) systematically reviewed literature on the benefits and challenges presented by the integration of web 2.0 technologies into higher education. They emphasise the widely accepted benefit of enabling new communication channels and media sharing with a specific emphasis on content generation (in the case of video sharing through YouTube, and virtual interaction e.g. on SecondLife). The rich picture of the uses of social technologies emerges as a means for content production, collaboration and communications. Serving not only as a new communication mechanism, social technologies also changed the mode of communication, - as well as synchronous communication new forms of asynchronous connections delivered by blogging and micro-blogging sites and various social networking services have been developed. Perhaps one of the earliest applications of social media - community enablement, has found its potential in the HE context. Support for existing communities and facilitating the formation of new ones through social media reflects the earlier ideas of the Community of enquiry framework (Garrison et al, 2000) and offers opportunities for instructors to move away from the didactic to student-led, constructivist approaches in their practice (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007). However, the opportunities presented by social media have significant challenges associated with them in the HE context. For example, the shift of control in a social networking environment towards students who are more accustomed to leading communication virtually and the impact of user generated content and its validity present only some of the emerging challenges (Conole & Alevizou, 2010). This chapter focuses on the implications of social media channels for universities, not only from the measurement of success, but also from the challenges presented by the ‘dark side’ of social technology which are yet to be fully understood. Multiple stakeholders are involved in the integration of social media by universities: students, instructors, alumni, support staff, marketers, industry, etc. By employing social media universities may find themselves charting the unknown waters of technology with yet to be defined principles for data handling, privacy and information protection, cognitive and behavioural implications, and more. We provide insights into the dual-edged sword of the social technology: enable Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to get a step closer to being able to define their goals for social media effectiveness and at the same time keep the challenges of social media in sight, for example privacy, information security, psychological implications and other challenges. This will enable HEIs to establish a successful, as well as efficient, social media communication strategy and to be in a position to measure the effectiveness of the new technology investment, enabling effective decision making regarding investment and approach. Further, it will help HE institutions in identifying the ‘pain points’ of social media and addressing the needs of internal and external stakeholders.

We discuss a case of an established multi channel social media strategy at a UK university and offer insights from academic staff into the benefits and challenges presented by the social technology in learning and teaching. We also present the dimensions of social media uses in an HE context and open the discussion on the set of metrics necessary for measuring the effectiveness of social media adopted in line with the goals of HEIs. Literature on business marketing provides plenty of metrics for social media analysis (Fodor & Hoffman, 2010), however the HE context is rather different. To address these differences we suggest a framework for aligning strategic objectives of HEIs along with possible social media strategies to achieve them. These strategies are applicable in various stages of the student lifecycle, which differs markedly in terms of university goals, students’ expectations and the objectives /involve-
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